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Pomona college planner tried Staten Island site

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POMONA - Developers planning a rabbinical college with housing for at least 4,500 people are connected to a large-scale residential development that had been proposed on Staten Island for Hasidic residents of Brooklyn.

Kolel Beth Yechiel Mechil of Tartikov proposed in the late 1990s to construct hundreds of homes for a Hasidic community, but the project died amid outcries against overdevelopment.

A similar sentiment may be found these days in Pomona, where residents worry that the proposed college would clash with their semi-rural neighborhood.

John Price, a village resident for 20 years, said the community, which has only 1-acre residential zoning, was largely unchanged from his first days there.

"I'm dead set against it," Price said of the plan. "Whether they tried it somewhere else or didn't, I'm still dead set against it."

The organization that proposed the Staten Island project is an affiliate of Congregation Kahal Minchas Chinuch, which formed the Congregation Rabbinical College of Tartikov, an institution proposed on more than 100 acres off Route 306 at Route 202, according to documents filed with the village Assessor's Office.

A rabbi of the religious group was Chaim Babad, who was also listed in an incorporation certificate as the presiding officer of the proposed college.

In documents at the Assessor's Office, Babad certified the incorporation of his congregation, whose address in another document was given as 1531 57th St., Brooklyn, in care of Babad Management, a real estate company.

Paul Savad, a Nanuet attorney representing the college corporation, said he was unaware of the Staten Island project.

"I only know about Tartikov in Rockland County," Savad said.

He would not comment on Babad or his real estate business.

"I don't discuss my clients," Savad said, "only the organization."

Babad did not return a telephone call to his Brooklyn office.

Savad represented both the trustees of the proposed college and Yeshiva of Spring Valley when the yeshiva sold the Pomona site to the college in 2005.

"I did the paperwork," Savad said of the \$13 million sale. "I represented Tartikov and the Yeshiva of Spring Valley, which also had attorneys involved who were on the (Yeshiva of Spring Valley) board."

Two years earlier, in 2003, another trustee of the proposed college, Michael Tauber, a real estate broker in Monsey, arranged Yeshiva of Spring Valley's acquisition of the former Van Riper farm on College Road in Ramapo.

Yeshiva of Spring Valley has plans before the town to build a school on the site, which is just south of Rockland Community College.

"I definitely feel uncomfortable discussing another person," Tauber replied when asked about Babad.

He said that his family and Babad's had been friendly "for many, many years. We go back 40, 50 years, maybe more."

Tauber said that he did not know about the Staten Island project but that he was aware of the existence of the religious group that sponsored it.

That group, Tauber said, was connected with the congregation proposing the Pomona college, identified in documents at the Assessor's Office as "Congregation Kahal Minchas Chinuch Inc. and affiliates."

Pomona Mayor Herb Marshall said he has had no contact with the developers and he was unaware of the Staten Island project.

"My concerns center around what happens in Pomona," Marshall said. "I don't think the folks who paid \$13 million for that property just popped out of an eggshell yesterday. They had to have something else going on somewhere."

In 1997, Kolel Beth Yachiel Mechil of Tartikov bought a site on Staten Island off Arthur Kill Road that was occupied by unused liquefied natural gas tanks.

Two years later, the organization was listed as one of New York City's top lobby interests by the New York Public Interest Research Group.

It spent \$45,000 that year to promote its Staten Island project with city planners and the Borough President's Office.

Joseph Margolis, the project's manager, said Friday that the plan was stalled.

For several years, a paintball park has leased part of the property, which still belongs to Babad's group.

Margolis said the plans were for 750 semi-attached homes and two yeshivas. There was to have been a town center and a waterfront park.

"This would have been a very classy job," Margolis said, citing the planting of thousands of trees, "but times change and we lost momentum."

He said the residents would have been from various Hasidic sects who needed inexpensive housing at a time when Staten Island's real estate climate was moving toward large houses on expansive lots.

"In general, there was a tremendous reaction to so-called overdevelopment on Staten Island," Margolis said.

Savad said the intent was to bring 1,000 rabbis to study for judgeships in religious courts. The rabbis and their families would occupy nine residential buildings between four and six floors high, according to preliminary plans.

He said that the development would be at the center of the property, and that landscaping would screen it from passing roads.

"You will not find anything that will not be disclosed in due course," Savad said. "This will be a privately run college. This is not a ruse to build housing for a profit."

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